

**MICHAEL LINN ELDRIDGE
(1941-2010)**

Michael Eldridge was born in Oklahoma City, OK, on 13 October 1941. He died unexpectedly at home in Charlotte, NC, on 18 September 2010 from a pulmonary embolism that developed after he broke his leg in an accident in his yard.

He began his higher education at Harding College in Searcy, AR, from which he graduated in 1964 with a BA in biblical languages. After further study at Abilene Christian College, he received a BD degree from the Yale Divinity School in 1969. Upon ordination in the Disciples of Christ, Mike spent the next five years in the ministry in Baltimore, MD, working in tandem for two churches, one belonging to the Disciples and the other to the United Church of Christ. Eventually, he drifted from the church into community organizing work for the city of Baltimore. Mike then taught ethics at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School in the Bronx from 1975 to 1978.

Mike returned to higher education in 1978, taking his first philosophy course ever and eventually receiving an MA in philosophy from Columbia University in 1980. He was awarded a PhD from the University of Florida at the age of 43 in 1985 with a dissertation entitled: "Philosophy as Religion: A Study in Critical Devotion."

After a further year as an instructor at Florida, Mike entered a tough job market; and, in an attempt to maximize his assets in Greek and Latin, he offered himself as an expert in ancient philosophy. I first met Mike at this point, when he spent a few days in Toledo on an ill-fated job interview at my university. Based on that brief encounter, I have no doubt that he would have become a very effective teacher of ancient philosophy had he continued in that direction; but all of us would have suffered a great loss.

In 1986, Mike was hired to teach philosophy at Spring Hill College in Mobile, AL, and he taught there until 1989. He then moved to Queens College in Charlotte, where he

taught with seeming success — he was approaching tenure with a record as an effective chair and the 1993 recipient of the 'Teacher of the Year' award — until 1994, when theological differences with the Presbyterian administration led to his dismissal. Mike landed across town at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte as a long-term lecturer, a position that he held until his official retirement in 2008. Far more than a place-holder in that role, he was deeply involved in the life of the department and in undergraduate education. He served, for example, for a number of years as the undergraduate philosophy coordinator.

During his years in Charlotte, Mike was also a very active scholar. His publications include: [Transforming Experience: John Dewey's Cultural Instrumentalism](#) (Vanderbilt University Press, 1998); the "Introduction" to the second volume of [The Correspondence of John Dewey](#) (InteLex, 2001); and numerous articles and encyclopedia entries on various aspects of American philosophy and the situation in American higher education. Mike also managed the website: www.obamaspragmatism.info.

On the international philosophical scene, Mike served as a Fulbright lecturer at the University of Szeged, Hungary (2004). He also was a welcome participant in numerous international conferences. Among the countries he visited as an ambassador of American philosophy were: Cuba, Brazil, Finland, Slovakia, Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Turkey, China, and South Korea.

Some of the memories I have of our joint travels — in addition, of course, to the real philosophical work — include a panel at a world congress in Porto Alegre, Brazil, where Mike greatly enjoyed having his visage displayed on a dictator-sized screen above his head as he spoke; a bus trip in a downpour near Shanghai, when Mike got soaked as he sat by a faulty window; a quiet meal of reindeer meat in the late-night sun in Helsinki, and the quest for ever-better ice cream in Cadiz.

For many years, Mike was very active on the programs of the annual meetings of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy. He was eventually elected to the position of Secretary, a position he filled with great enthusiasm and care, from 2006-2010. When he stepped down last year, he was honored by the Society with its Josiah Royce Award for Loyalty for his many years of service.

Unlike some philosophers whose lives and work seem separate projects, Mike revealed a great deal about himself in his writings. His topics were his own, not drawn from what was 'in the air'; his style was personal, slow and thorough. What I would like to do in my remaining time is to develop a partial portrait of Mike by sketching out some of his philosophical ideas on the topics of higher education, political change, and religious renewal.

Beginning with higher education, Mike wrote a detailed review of my volume on the early years of the American Philosophical Association.¹ His review begins, unpromisingly, as follows: "This is not a book that everyone should read"; but Mike saves himself when he continues that it is a book that "anyone who cares about our profession" and how it reached its present situation "should study carefully."² We can consider, for example, his careful summary of the nature and workings of the old-time college:

academic philosophy in the United States in the nineteenth century was found most often in small colleges and was confined to a single course taught by the Protestant minister-president. And by 'small' I mean really small. The faculty oftentimes was no more than a half dozen or so college-educated — not university-trained — teachers. They understood themselves to be transmitters of knowledge

¹ James Campbell, *A Thoughtful Profession: The Early Years of the American Philosophical Association* (Chicago: Open Court, 2006).

² "When Philosophy Became What It Is Today," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, XLIII/2 (Spring 2007), pp. 375-381. This passage appears on page 376.

rather than original producers of it. The philosophy that was taught had its origins in Europe and was an ultimately unstable synthesis of empiricism, Christianity, and the metaphysics of a reality that lies beyond experience. It was above all anti-skeptical and practical in orientation. This Scottish common sense realism, as it was known, was considered safe and necessary for the education of a Christian gentleman, which it was the aim of the college to produce. Philosophy was not done for its own sake; it was fully a part of the community, that is, the educated, professional, economically advantaged segment of society. It supported the evangelical orientation of this community, while enabling its teachers and students to embrace fully the scientific and technological developments of the day.³

This academic world was being upset by Darwinism, the 'higher' biblical criticism, and the many industrial and social changes that followed the Civil War.

For a Deweyan like Mike, this moment represented a great possibility for fashioning a system of higher education — with philosophy at its core — to advance an alternate conception of the social good. We know, of course, that things turned out differently; that the leaders (and perhaps the membership) of the Western Philosophical Association and the American Philosophical Association were far more interested in narrow philosophical research and advancing 'original work.' As Mike writes:

Attention to teaching, the production of textbooks, the transmitting of past philosophical achievements — all within a conventional cultural understanding — was what they were attempting to go beyond. These had been the emphases of the colleges. These newly professional philosophers were developing a support group that would enable them to be fully a part of the new scientific, rigorous education that was emerging at the end of the nineteenth century . . . this transformed profession would value 'original investigation' over edification either in the classroom or in public forums. What philosophy became in the twentieth century was no accident; it was truly a thoughtful profession even if some of us now question the wisdom of this thoughtful action.⁴

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 376-377.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 378, 380.

This abdication of a public role by the philosophical profession bothered Mike, both because it cut philosophy out of a major social task, and because it deprived those who were so engaged from any philosophical help.

Turning now to Mike's work in political philosophy, we all know that he found in Dewey help for addressing the problems of social change. (I doubt that he would have found similar help in Plato or Aristotle, had he continued in ancient philosophy).

One of the themes to which Mike returned again and again was Dewey's comment that he had not been attempting to "practicalize intelligence" but rather to "intellectualize practice."⁵ Mike's take on this distinction was that social practice was our primary interest, although too often our practice was unthinking and myopic. "We act in habitual ways, but sometimes our customary ways of acting cease to be effective ways of meeting our needs." In these instances, when there is "a discrepancy between our interests and our satisfactions," we need to examine our practices and find a better fit "between ends and means." When we decide that the gap between the two has become too great, we should "rethink what we are doing," following Dewey's suggestions for "deliberation and experimentation."⁶

The theme of the complexity of intelligent change was another important aspect of Mike's social thought. He notes repeatedly that we have the power to modify our future: "we do not have to just take what comes." We can advance our interests by using "some activities to

⁵ *Transforming Experience: John Dewey's Cultural Instrumentalism* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), p. 5. Eldridge is drawing here from Charles Frankel, "John Dewey's Social Philosophy," *New Studies in the Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. Steven M. Cahn (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1977), pp. 3-44.

⁶ "Dewey on Race and Social Change," *Pragmatism and the Problem of Race*, ed. Bill E. Lawson and Donald F. Koch, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 11-21. This passage appears on page 16.

bring about others," and "[t]his employment of indirect action is intelligence."⁷ Mike realized, however, that intelligent change did not necessarily mean peaceful change:

I grew up in a segregated society. I can recall separate schools for blacks and whites, separate public restrooms and drinking fountains, and violent racial confrontations. I do not think that the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties could have had the success it did in transforming the deplorable, desperate situation without something more than discussion, communication, and good will. We needed the sometimes painful confrontations that were often occasioned by the aggressive tactics of the civil rights movement.

Mike continues, however, that "education, whether we are talking about schooling or that which occurs through public deliberation, is preferable to sudden, violent change, particularly if that violence is allowed to overwhelm and displace the deliberative efforts."⁸ Intelligent change also means change that does not create more problems.

A third central theme is Mike's focus on the long-term. As he writes, "[t]he aim of a democratic political technology is to create a social order that liberates individuals; it is not mere political victory." The goal in democratic politics is "the widespread distribution of power, not its concentration." For Mike, the best means available for distributing power was to "intelligize political practice" by adopting such strategic guidelines as:

- (1) Be wary of both idealists and political operatives, for both separate ideals and methods . . .
- (2) realize that neither the existing situation nor some supposed alternative is absolute. The present situation was constructed by human activity; therefore, it can be reconstructed . . .
- (3) employ social inquiry to identify both the practice to be changed (including its conditions

⁷ *Transforming Experience*, p. 200.

⁸ "Thick Democracy Too Much? Try Pragmatism Lite," *Education for a Democratic Society*, ed. John Ryder and Gert-Rüdiger Wegmarshaus, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 121-129. This passage appears on p. 127.

and consequences) and the end-in-view to be realized . . .

(4) use social inquiry to create a public . . . Publics are neither given nor found; they are created through informed, open communication and self-identification in reference to common needs and purposes. Publics are made, not born, and they are made through inquiry. . .

(5) look for middle ground — that is commonalities . . .

(6) employ democratic means to realize democratic ends.⁹

Mike also writes about the place of philosophy in this process of intelligent social change: “the task of the social philosopher is to encourage the development of the method of social intelligence; it is not to work out the solutions.”¹⁰ Here we have what is an apparent — but only an apparent — break with Dewey. Mike writes that “[w]e should not take his suggestions as suggestions for us.” What we need to do instead is to approach “the problems of his time and learn from the method he employed.” We thus face two distinct commitments. “It is the task of philosophy to cultivate methods for dealing with human problems; it is the task of everyone to work on our common problems.” To confuse these two tasks and to seek programmatic answers in Dewey is to misunderstand his method. “He spoke to particular situations, using his philosophically cultivated methods.”¹¹ These situations are not ours — although his approach remains valuable.

A third topic that played a large role in Mike’s philosophic perspective was religion, and here too he found help in Dewey’s work. Perhaps drawing upon his own personal experience, Mike wrote of Dewey’s concern “for those who had abandoned traditional beliefs and were not in the churches, yet still considered themselves — or wished to be — religious.” He saw an important role for the religious in the ongoing self-definition of the community. What Dewey advocated,

and what Mike attempted, was “the emancipation of the religious elements within ordinary experience,”¹² the cultivation of a sense of a larger whole that is often submerged in the moments of living. This emancipation has been the task of naturalism — which Mike describes as “opposition to supernaturalism, association with science, and humanity as fully a part of nature”¹³ — for at least a century.

Mike writes that Dewey “was trying to find a middle way between his secular sensibility and the conventional religious heritage of his reading public.”¹⁴ For those of a religious attitude — among whom I would classify Mike — this search continues. Mike was a pragmatist who came late to philosophy; but he became a philosopher who helped us on this search.

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⁹ *Transforming Experience*, pp. 113-114.

¹⁰ “Dewey on Race and Social Change,” p. 19.

¹¹ “Dewey’s Limited Shelf Life: A Consumer Warning,” *In Dewey’s Wake: Unfinished Work of Pragmatic Reconstruction*, ed. William J. Gavin, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), pp. 25-39. This passage appears on page 37.

¹² *Transforming Experience*, pp. 147-148,

¹³ “Naturalism,” *Blackwell Guide to American Philosophy*, ed. Armen T. Marsoobian and John Ryder (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 52-71. This passage appears on page 52.

¹⁴ *Transforming Experience*, p. 168.